Comparing the National Archives and Records Administration

of the United States with Library and Archives Canada:

Is there opportunity for collaboration?

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Abstract

The National Archives and Records Administration of the United States and Library and Archives Canada are similar in general purpose, but differ in history, mandate, scope, and information systems. While collaboration might seem logical given the geographical proximity of the two countries, research shows that the differences are too numerous for these institutions to find common ground for collaboration at this time. However, as digital and electronic technology continues to expand into new areas, these archives may find new opportunities to collaborate.

Introduction

The United States and Canada share one of the longest country borders in the world, yet have many differences. And while each has founded an institution to store, maintain and access important national and governmental records, the institutions display differences in history, style, and purpose, stemming from the respective histories of the organizations, the political histories of the countries, laws enacted, geography and demographics.

I propose to explore whether, given these differences, the Library and Archives Canada (LAC) and National Archives and Records Administration of the United States (NARA) share any common ground upon which to base collaboration. I will demonstrate that these institutions have too little in common, so would likely not find substantial reward in shared efforts. In the future however, as these institutions, as well as others throughout the world, become more involved in digital and electronic technology, areas of research which could benefit substantially by collaboration may be present.

Literature Review

I found the literature available for this topic via a variety of sources. There are numerous articles, both scholarly and newsworthy, discussing the creation and progress of Library and Archives Canada, as well as historical documents related to the creation and growth of the United States National Archives. The sources were found in online scholarly and reference databases, as well as in published book form.

Much of the information available for Library and Archives Canada was written by those who actively participated in the merger process. While the same was not true for the National Archives of the United States, scholarly information from respected experts in that field, and contemporary newsworthy articles from newspapers and similar sources were investigated. In both examples, there was discussion of the merits of each institution, but this writer encountered no examples of controversy within the found literature.

Gaps

I would have liked to find more information about the specific organizational systems used by each institution. While references were found to the Canadian systems prior to the LAC merger, as well as early attempts of the United States National Archives, and plans for electronic records, I found little information about current-day systems.

In addition, there seems to be little, if any literature directly comparing these two institutions to each other, or to similar institutions in other countries.

Methodology

I researched this topic with a variety of techniques. Since the merger of the two Canadian institutions was less than ten years ago, the more current online research databases, within the information science field as well as in more general research databases provided much of the information. Published books as well as online archival newspaper databases provided historical background. In addition, the websites for each institution provided more recent history and details about the current information systems in use.

History

The word *archives* is derived from the Greek word *archeion*, which meant both the records themselves, and their storage place (McCoy, 1978).

France is credited with the first modern-day national archives, with its Archives Nationales in 1789. Great Britain opened its similar Public Records Office in 1838, and by 1900, many, if not most European countries had similar institutions (McCoy, 1978).

Prior to 1841, Canada had two jurisdictions: Upper Canada and Lower Canada, which had separate libraries for Parliament and/or the Legislature. Each of the prior jurisdictions had long-standing guidelines dictating which records to store. These two regions were combined in 1841, and the library collections and staff transferred to the new Federal Government of Canada in 1867. At this time the archival function was removed from the Parliament and the legislature, into a new Canadian Archives (Donnelly, 1973).

The process to establish a National Archives began in earnest in 1871. Douglas Brimner, in his 1883 "Report on Canadian Archives", noted that a petition was filed suggesting that "the best interests of this country would be consulted by establishing a system with respect to historical Archives, analogous to those of Great Britain, France, and the United States" (as cited in Donnelly, 1973). (Note that the United States did not actually establish its National Archives until almost sixty years later.) The recommendation was adopted and given initial funding in Spring 1872, and Brimner was appointed the first archivist.

The National Library of Canada was created much later. While it was first proposed in 1883, soon after the creation of the National Archives, it didn't come into existence until 1953,

also by an act of Parliament, and moved into its building fourteen years after that (Donnelly, 1973). It was created to serve Canadians and Canadian libraries, rather than Parliament, which had its own library (Doucet, 2007, p. 61).

These two institutions functioned separately for several decades, until in 2002, the Librarian and the Archivist realized that it was no longer logical to separate them. Doucet (2007) stated, "The boundaries had blurred to the point where they were no longer justifiable to our end users, or to the institutions themselves" (p. 62). According to Draper (2004), "Canadians simply wanted to find information that was useful to them, regardless of which institution provided it" (p. 9).

Library and Archives Canada was proclaimed on May 21, 2004 by an act of Parliament, officially merging the National Library of Canada and the National Archives of Canada. It was and is "the first blend of a national library and national archive any country has attempted" (Taylor, 2005, p. R3).

The two institutions were merged primarily for reasons of scale, access and efficiency, "…but by far, the greatest impetus was the opportunity for digital access presented by the pervasiveness of the Internet" (Loewen, (2008), p. 149).

 "The intent was not simply to combine two functions under a single administration, but to create a new, integrated, knowledge-based institution" (Wilson, 2006, p. 135). The merger "brought together 1,200 employees – librarians, archivists and other information professionals learning from each other and working together to provide a continuum of information services for Canadians" (Parent, 2007, slide 3).

While the United States has been creating records since before its independence over 230 years ago, a formal archival storage facility with laws and guidelines has been in place only for the last 75 years, far more recent than the Canadian archives.

The creation of the U.S. National Archives was largely due to the efforts of one man, John Franklin Jameson, with the help of an organization called the American Historical Association (AHA), organized in 1884 (Gondos, 1981). An educator and historian born in 1859, he began working toward a national archives for the United States in 1895, when he proposed a "systematic collection, organization, and selective publication scheme of source materials in American history" to the AHA (Tinerella, 2005, para. 15).

Even from the time the United States began to function as an independent entity, no laws dictated how national records should be handled. It was up to each individual agency or official to make arrangements, and presidents took their papers with them when they left office. Without official provisions for storage or upkeep, records were left to garages, attics, secondary spaces -- wherever they could be stored at low cost. They were, according to Dr. Waldo G. Leland, "in cellars and subcellars, and under terraces, in attics and over porticos, in corridors and closed-up doorways, piled in heaps upon the floor, or crowded into alcoves; this, if they were not farmed out and stored in such rented structures as abandoned car-barns, storage warehouses, deserted theatres, or ancient but more humble edifices that should long ago have served their last useful purpose" (as cited in MacCloskey, 1968, p. 171). "Until Jameson persuaded the AHA to spearhead the movement for the establishment of a national archives, only a handful of interested

but politically ineffectual citizens expressed concern over the state of American record keeping…. Congress, ignoring the problem's magnitude, regularly turned attention to other matters" (Tinerella, 2005, para. 27).

For many decades recommendations for a facility were made and bills suggested, but none made much progress. The initial effort was toward a "hall of records" to merely store non-current records, leaving the ownership and administration of those records to each agency that created them. President Wilson, who had been a student of Jameson's, supported the cause until foreign affairs and World War I intervened (Gondos, 1981). In April 1920, well after the war, Jameson wrote to a fellow archivist: "I have been struggling for a dozen years to obtain the erection here of a suitable national archive building, and a site has been selected and sketch plans prepared, but I am not likely, even in this present session of Congress, to get the necessary appropriations" (Gondos, 1981, page 90). Jameson had no way of knowing that President Wilson had been stricken by a severe stroke six months before, and had not been seen by country nor Cabinet since. He was left incapable of carrying out his duties. His wife Edith restricted his contact to herself and medical staff, so the lack of progress might have been his - or hers (HealthMediaLab, 2004).

In 1926, Congress finally approved funds to acquire a site for a National Archives. However, ground was not broken for the building until 1931, and the cornerstone not laid until two years after that, in 1933 (McCoy, 1978).

The National Archives Act was finally signed on June 19, 1934. The bill passed in part because it also included funds to build ornate federal buildings such as post offices in cities

across the country (Gondos, 1981). On October 10, 1934, Robert Connor became the first

Archivist of the United States.

While the National Archives of the United States was began as an independent agency, in

1949 it was incorporated into a newly-created General Services Administration, a system-wide

supplies, property and records management agency. It was renamed the National Archives and

Records Service (McCoy, 1978).

It functioned as part of the General Services Administration until 1984 , when it again

became an independent agency as the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA),

a status it has retained to the present day.

In comparing these two institutions, it is important to realize that at base level, there is a

very large difference in scale of the two endeavors, and the countries they represent.

"In terms of land mass, Canada is geographically the second largest country in the world

[slightly larger than the United States], yet our population, just over 32 million, is smaller

than California's, which is slightly over 36 million. Ottawa, the nation's capital where

LAC is situated, is a small city. It has a population of one million, though that size has

only recently been achieved. Most of the population base in Canada is located in the

cities of Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal" (Doucet, 2007, p. 62).

LAC currently has 121 linear kilometers, or 396,982 feet of historical government textual

records in its holdings. (LAC, 2005) NARA, on the other hand, has approximately 2,720,765

cubic feet of holdings listed in the Archival Records Catalogue, in 520 Record Groups, 2365

Collections, 102,598 Series, 3,265,988 File Units, and 292,887 Items. (NARA, 2010) Clearly

NARA has a much more massive task on its hands just in terms of sheer volume.

Mandate

Before the LAC merger, the National Archives of Canada "had responsibility for

culturally significant private archives as well as government records" (Doucet, 2007, p. 61).

The National Library of Canada had, as its original 1953 mandate, to "acquire, preserve,

promote and provide access to the published heritage of Canada for all Canadians" (Scott and

Sylvestre, 2010, para. 1). This was stated as "building a world-class national resource that will

enable Canadians to know their country and themselves through their published heritage; […

and] facilitating access for all Canadians to national and international networks of information

resources" (Scott and Sylvestre, 2010, para. 1).

The new combined institution had the advantage of being thoroughly planned and was

vetted by archivists and librarians throughout the country.

The Act preserves the essential elements of the mandates of the former two institutions,

adding some new scope and new powers (LAC, 2004, para. 4). … It is:

(*a*) to acquire and preserve the documentary heritage;

(*b*) to make that heritage known to Canadians and to anyone with an interest in

Canada and to facilitate access to it;

(*c*) to be the permanent repository of publications of the government of Canada

and of government and ministerial records that are of historical or archival value;

(*d*) to facilitate the management of information by government institutions;

(*e*) to coordinate the library services of government institutions;

and

(*f*) to support the development of the library and archival communities (LAC,

2004, para. 4).

The Act also introduced a new legal concept: 'documentary heritage', which includes

publications in all media and records related to Canada (LAC, 2010).

In the U.S., the National Archives' central mission and most important work, however,

was to "appraise, accession, preserve, and make available for research the official records of

lasting value" (McCoy, 1978, p. 59).

NARA provides oversight and guidance to Federal agencies and records management

programs to assure that they effectively create and preserve evidence essential to document the

rights of citizens, the actions of Federal officials, and the National experience" (NARA, 2008,

para. 1).

The Strategic Directions: Appraisal Policy, part of an internal NARA Directive 1441

(2007) states that "NARA's mission is to ensure "for the Citizen and the Public Servant, for the

President and the Congress and the Courts ready access to essential evidence."

Essential evidence is comprised of those records that document the:

(1) Rights of American citizens;

(2) Actions of Federal officials; and

(3) National experience.

Records that document the rights of citizens enable them to establish their

identities, protect their rights, and claim their entitlements. Records that document actions

of Federal officials that enable them to explain past decisions, form future policy, and be

accountable for consequences. Records that document the national experience provide the

means for evaluating the effects of Federal actions on the nation and for understanding its

history, science, and culture, including the man-made and natural environment (NARA,

2007, Section 6).

Scope of jurisdiction

The text of the LAC Act is available at http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/L-7.7/80647.html .

There are a few concepts which guide the LAC in determining which record to keep. The first is

legal deposit: "Canadian publishers are required to send one or two copies (dependent on print

run) of all books, serials (journals, periodicals, newsletters), spoken word sound recordings,

video recordings, CD/DVD-ROMs and microforms. One copy is required for musical sound

recordings, CDs and multi-media kits. On January 1, 2007 legal deposit was extended to include

maps and online or Internet publications" (LAC, 2009, para. 3).

Another concept is that of macro-appraisal, conceived by Terry Cook, who worked at the

National Archives of Canada from 1975 to 1998.

The old approach, Cook explains, was like peeling an onion. The 'onion' was a load of

documents dumped off at the Archives -- the end of the line -- and the archivist would

peel away one painstaking layer at a time, deciding what should be saved. The macro-

appraisal approach … takes the onion and bores straight through to the centre and looks

at each layer in context with the next and how it relates to the core. Here, the archivist

sees a cross-section of information and considers all of it as a whole. In this way, Cook

figures, the archivist can determine much more easily which 1 or 2 percent of records is

the most relevant and representative sample worth saving. (Roberts, 2007, para. 17)

"Archivists now routinely visit government departments and identify which processes

they need to document. Often this occurs even before these records are produced -- at the very

front end of a record's life cycle. …. Once the archivists understand how a department works,

they can decide which samples to save -- and authorize departmental records managers to destroy

the rest" (Roberts, 2007, para. 19).

"Most people have the notion that the archivist's job is all about saving the past," he

[Cook] says. "Actually, archivists are as much about destroying as they are about preserving. Of

the one hundred percent of records out there, the archives saves one, maybe two, percent"

(Roberts, 2007, para. 15).

LAC is also directed to collect internet-based material: …"for the purpose of preservation

the Librarian and Archivist may take, at the times and in the manner that he or she considers

appropriate, a representative sample of the documentary material of interest to Canada that is

accessible to the public without restriction through the Internet or any similar medium" (Parent,

2007, slide 17). "At the end of March 2005 over 15,000 Internet publications had been acquired,

archived and catalogued in AMICUS, the national bibliographic database. …Over the past year

[2005] LAC also continued to acquire, archive, and describe some major federal government and

non-government web sites" (Wilson, 2005, para. 16).

LAC has also instituted a program to acquire, catalogue and publish theses accepted at Canadian universities. By August 2004, over 230,000 theses existed, with a Theses Canada Portal at http:// collectionscanada.ca/thesescanada/index-e.html (Carrier, 2007). "In the 2004-2005 year, the over 45,000 Canadian theses available in electronic [PDF] format on the Theses Canada Portal were indexed [in AMICUS], making them full-text searchable. Building on the successful launch of the Portal, LAC built a data harvester and repository based on the OAI Protocol for Metadata Harvesting and conducted a pilot project to harvest both metadata and electronic theses from four Canadian universities. The harvesting program is expected to be available to other universities in the 2005-2006 fiscal year" (Wilson, 2005, para. 17).

The institution now also includes the Portrait Gallery of Canada, the largest group of national portraits in the country. The collection includes: "more than 20,000 paintings, drawings and prints, 4 million photographs, several thousand caricatures, and ten thousand medals and philatelic items" (LAC, 2010, para. 1).

In the United States, legal deposit is in effect, but under the jurisdiction of the Library of Congress, not NARA.

The National Archives receives "requisitions for transfer" for the following:

I. Any archives or records (a) which the head of the agency in custody of them may deem not to be necessary for use in the conduct of the regular current business of said agency; (b) which he may consider to be in such physical condition that they cannot be

used without danger of damage to them; and (c) for which, in his opinion, he is unable to provide adequate or safe storage.

II. Any archives or records of any federal agency that has gone out of existence unless its functions have been transferred to the agency which has custody of its records.

III. Any other archives or records which the National Archives Council by special resolution, or which the head of the agency in custody of them for special reasons, may authorize to be transferred to the National Archives (McCoy, 1978, p. 67).

Soon after the establishment of the agency, the archivist was legally charged with recommending to Congress what records should be discarded (McCoy, 1978). A government-wide survey of useless records was begun in 1935, in an effort to determine the scope of what might be discarded. It never caught up with new records being generated, and in 1939 Congress passed the Records Disposal Act, which "empowered the archivist to authorize the disposition of useless records under certain circumstances when the legislators were not in session" (McCoy, 1978, p. 63). "Approved schedules of disposable records" were created, using past experience to predict which current and future records might be disposed of without specific permission. These schedules came to be used in concept by other archives and countries, and throughout the archival science field.

The Records Disposal Act also formalized the 1939 definition of a record: "originals or copies of motion-picture or sound recordings, correspondence, papers, indexes, maps, charts, plans, drawings, punch cards, tabulation sheets, pictures and other kinds of records belonging to the United States Government" (McCoy, 1978, p. 63).

That definition has been updated to include "all books, papers, maps, photographs, machine-readable materials, or other documentary materials, regardless of physical form or characteristics, made or received by an agency of the United States Government under Federal law or in connection with the transaction of public business and preserved or appropriate for preservation by that agency or its legitimate successor as evidence of the organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, or other activities of the Government or because of the informational value of the data in them (44 U.S.C. 3301)" (NARA, 2000, para. 4).

Among other responsibilities, NARA is responsible for publishing the Federal Register since its creation in 1935. "A special committee of the American Bar Association declared in 1934 that 'Rules, regulations and other exercises of legislative power by executive or administrative officials should be made easily and readily available at some central office.' " (McCoy, 1978, p. 53). That same year, a committee of the National Emergency council recommended the publication be created, and it was passed into law in July 1935, and produced the first edition on March 14, 1936 (McCoy, 1978). It has always been under the jurisdiction of the National Archives.

The National Archives is also authorized to publish the Code of Federal Regulations. In 1936, Congress authorized a codification of all the agency regulations currently in effect, and the legislation was approved in June 1937. While the first submittal deadline was July 1, 1938, the editing of that first edition, ultimately 15 volumes, was not finished until 1941, published as each volume was completed. The Federal Register, provided annual supplements during the interim (McCoy, 1978).

NARA is also now responsible for Presidential Libraries. President Franklin Roosevelt was the impetus for this effort: since 1935, he'd been concerned about the disposition and access of his papers after his term. In 1938 he told Robert Connor (Archivist at that time) that he planned to build a repository and library on his family Hyde Park estate. While the building would be financed by private funds, it would be (and indeed was) ceded to the Federal government, with the contents donated to the National Archives (McCoy, 1978). NARA now manages and maintains twelve Presidential libraries. Like Roosevelt's, each was built with private funds (or is housed at a university) (Relyea, 2008, p. CRS-1-2). The papers of a President are no longer considered his personal property, to save or destroy at his choice.

Cataloguing systems

Both institutions are based on the French rule of *respect des fonds*, developed early in the nineteenth century. This concept dictated that a group of records, usually those accumulated by a functioning office of a government agency, must not be mixed with other groups" (McCoy, 1978). Such a system arranges records on the basis of how they were originally created. NARA (and perhaps LAC as well) also includes the complementary idea of *provenance* developed by the Germans later in that century, that the original *order* of records must be retained. The Dutch, in effect, soon combined the two concepts and made the result into a universal principle of archival administration" (McCoy, 1978).

Since LAC is a merger of two previous long-functioning organizations, it began with two separate information systems. AMICUS is the bibliographic database of the National Library of Canada. Even though the merger was two years in the planning and six years ago, AMICUS is still in use. The database includes records of "over 30 million records from 1,300 Canadian libraries including LAC," and lets users "check library holdings, loan policies, homepages, etc." (LAC, 2008, para. 1-2).

The National Archives of Canada used an integrated archival holdings management system known as MIKAN. While records in the LAC still retain their MIKAN source numbers if assigned, this writer was unable to determine if the system is still actively used.

LAC is now developing a combined system to be called AMICAN. "Access to digital holdings will be emphasized from the perspective of search design, indexes, search results and display. …. The public search module will benefit in terms of speed and flexibility from an XML cache, created from MARC21 and local data elements using MODS 3.0 (Metadata Object Description Schema) and extensions" (LAC, 2005, AMICAN section).

According to Ian Wilson, "What AMICAN will ultimately mean is that our clients will have a single point of access to everything in our collection a unique memory bank of our Canadian documentary heritage. Through AMICAN we will create a simple search interface that will give Canadian seamless integrated access not only to LAC holdings, in a variety of media, but to the collections of our partners across the country" (Wilson, 2006, page 137). Via any of these systems, a researcher can search for specific document; the records are archived individually.

NARA struggled to find a means of simplifying storage and access to its records from the time the agency was created. A Classification Division was created, but because of the quantity and variety of the records, it soon became clear that implementing such a system throughout the vast quantity of records was neither practical nor feasible. The division was disbanded in 1941. An attempt to create a cataloguing system was also attempted, but failed, again because of the sheer quantity of records to be processed, and the difficulty researchers would find in trying to use it. The attempt was abandoned by 1939 (McCoy, 1978).

Now NARA uses the *respect des fonds* and *provenance* principles, focusing on record series, office units, and items rather than individual records.

A series is the basic unit for organizing and controlling files. It is a group of files or documents kept together (either physically or intellectually) because they relate to a particular subject or function, result from the same activity, document a specific type of transaction, take a particular physical form, or have some other relationship arising out of their creation, receipt, maintenance, or use (36 CFR 1220.14).

Each record series must be scheduled for appropriate disposition. The series concept is a flexible one, and programs should create series by organizing documents in ways that facilitate management of the records throughout their life cycle. For example, each record series in hard copy should be physically separated from all other record series. Electronic records should be managed in ways that link records to their disposition authority, within the context of a recordkeeping system (NARA, 2000, para. 6-7).

While an online information retrieval system known as the Archival Research Catalog is available, searching for an individual document is not possible (NARA, 2010).. For example, while J. Franklin Jameson might be mentioned in numerous documents in the archives, no means exists to locate each of those records.

The Archives now provides guidance for the entire life of a record, from its inception to disposal or archival storage. While it attempts to include all stored Series etc. from its holdings at both the main branch and the field branches, it does not partner with any outside organizations or other governments or municipalities.

Conclusion

The archives system in Canada officially began in 1872, with the United States following in 1934. Both systems have experienced additions of new departments and responsibilities, changes in direction, ever-increasing quantities of records to appraise, accession, and or purge, and are now trying to handle the current electronic age, including file formats, email/texting/twittering, and debating what to make publicly available online. They both have strict regulatory guides on what they can and cannot do. With these similarities, however, it is plain that for the reasons presented here, they would not likely see much benefit to collaborating at this time. It is quite reasonable, however, to anticipate that research into electronic archiving, standards, and data migration may offer future opportunities for collaboration.

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